

Covering the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar: Football and (New) Cultural Politics

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Abstract:

This paper explores the multifaceted cultural dynamics surrounding the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, with a specific focus on the Moroccan national football team. The narrative unfolds through the lenses of media and crowd behavior theories, revealing the complex interplay of global and local forces. As Western media engages in controversial representations rooted in Orientalism, the paper examines the contrasting celebration of the Moroccan team by Arabo-Islamic supporters. It delves into the culture wars triggered by biased coverage, epitomized by moments of ridicule for the team's expressions of Islamic identity. The study extends to the diasporic experience of Moroccan footballers, exemplified by the "both/and" logic that defines their global identity. Through the lens of key football players like Achraf Hakimi and Ziyech, the paper sheds light on the intricate relationship between football, migration, and the construction of cultural identities.

Keywords: The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Moroccan football team, culture wars, diaspora, cultural politics, representation, sports media

Introduction:

In 2022, Qatar was the first Middle Eastern nation to host the largest sporting event of the World Cup, a monumental event that attracted an enormous global audience. This achievement marked a new, albeit unwelcome, detour in the history of the World Cup organization. Many people in the soccer world were surprised when FIFA and Blatter's executive committee awarded Qatar the opportunity to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, especially given that other countries like the United States, South Korea, Japan, and Australia were considered more appealing choices. As the competition was going ahead, many controversies surrounded the selection of Qatar as the host country: on the one hand, Western concerns over human rights, worker safety, and infrastructure capacity in Qatar were aired, and on the other the Arab nation was fully committed to making the event a triumph; Qatar saw the World Cup as a chance to display its distinctive Islamic heritage and customs to the world while establishing itself as a prominent global player.

The football competition became an arena of cultural struggles between the West and Islam, with Qatar in general and the Moroccan team in particular, as it will be seen, epitomizing Islamic values, traditions, and people against a libertarian and even 'queered' Western democracy. Among supporters and fans, feelings and expressions of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism were high in the Arabo-Islamic world, whilst calls to hold Qatar accountable for its violation of human rights, and accusations of belonging to Daesh and terrorist groups were attached to the Moroccan team as it continued to excel in the competition. In the midst of these culture wars and contests 'East' and 'West' seemed 'never to meet', as Kipling said. The fact remains, however, that other realities of the cultural imbrication of so-called East and West were

obfuscated and remained overshadowed by the dominant culture wars. Hence my interest in this paper is to shed light on football's cross-cultural or transcultural dimension, using the concept of 'glocalization,' in order to highlight the interdependence of local and global processes within the Moroccan team's identities and institutions. Against the divisive and parochial discourses of nationalist sentiment and alt-right reactionary responses, this paper seeks more specifically to relocate the Moroccan team's participation in the Qatar World Cup within the local/global nexus by examining the postcolonial contexts of migration and diaspora.

Understanding Media and Crowd Behavior

In this theoretical section, I look at two theories which can help us understand the culture wars surrounding the last FIFA World Cup: (1) media theory and (2) crowd behavior theory. Firstly, in today's globalized world—an image-saturated world—media plays a central role in the production, diffusion and spread of information, and because of this my paper's focal point is about how the World Cup in Qatar became a mediatized event. That is to say, media reports of the event needn't be understood as so many reflections of existing realities out there but as discursive constructions or representations of those realities whose meanings can make full sense only if we are able to see through the contexts of cultural politics that condition their very production. A number of cultural theorists who have made significant contributions to the study of media and cultural representation emphasized the importance of understanding how meaning is produced in culture and how it is shaped by social, historical, and political contexts. For instance, one of Stuart Hall's key ideas was that representation is not a direct reflection of reality but a constructed process that involves both the producers of the media and the audience. In his essay "Encoding/Decoding," he argued that "media messages are produced and circulated within specific institutional and professional frameworks which provide the conditions of their production and circulation" (Hall, 1980, p. 128). He also noted that audiences interpret media messages in different ways, depending on their own cultural and social backgrounds.

Furthermore, both Hall and Hooks suggested that representation is not neutral but is imbued with power relations. In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, he wrote that "representation is always political: it involves the struggle over meanings, over who has the power to define and categorize social reality, and over how that reality is to be represented" (Hall, 1997, p. 16). In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Bell Hooks wrote, "Representation is not simply a matter of aesthetic choice or personal preference, but is deeply implicated in the construction and maintenance of systems of domination" (Hooks, 1992, p. 3). She has argued that mainstream media often perpetuates oppressive stereotypes and that alternative media is needed to challenge these dominant narratives.

Hall also emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity and complexity of cultural identities in representation. He argued that individuals have multiple identities that are shaped by various factors such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. In his essay "New Ethnicities," he stated that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall, 1990, p. 227).

In short, these views on representation emphasize the constructed and political nature of meaning-making in culture, the power dynamics involved in representation, and the importance of recognizing the diversity and complexity of cultural identities. Critical media studies, inspired by Hooks and Hall's insights, constitute a theoretical framework that seeks to understand the ways in which media messages are produced, circulated, and consumed, and the impact that they have on audiences.

Secondly, crowd behavior refers to the actions, attitudes, and emotions displayed by a group of individuals in a particular situation or setting. The behavior of a crowd can be influenced by a variety of factors, including the size and composition of the crowd, the context of the situation, and the emotional state of the individuals within the crowd. Crowd behavior can range from peaceful and cooperative to aggressive and destructive. In some cases, crowds can form for positive reasons, such as to celebrate a victory or show support for a cause. However, in other cases, crowds can become unruly and dangerous, resulting in violence, property damage, and injuries. Football gatherings exemplify both crowd tendencies: they can be expressions of crowd joy and excitement in the case of many national supporters, as well as they may grow violent and destructive where Hooligans and aggressive Ultras are concerned.

Researchers have identified several key factors that can influence crowd behavior, including the level of anonymity within the crowd, the presence of perceived threats, the influence of social norms, and the degree of cohesion within the group. Elias Canetti, the Bulgarian-born writer and philosopher, was particularly interested in human behavior and the dynamics of power. In his book *Crowds and Power* (1984), he explores the behavior of crows as a metaphor for the workings of human society. Canetti saw crows as a particularly interesting species because they exhibit both individual and collective behavior. He observed that individual crows are very intelligent and are capable of problem-solving and tool use. However, when they gather in groups, they become part of a collective intelligence that is greater than the sum of its parts. According to Canetti, the behavior of crows in a group can be seen as a microcosm of human society. He argued that both crows and humans are driven by a desire for power, and that power is manifested in the ability to control and manipulate others. In his view, the power dynamics within a crow flock reflect the power dynamics within human society. Canetti also believed that civilization is characterized by a constant struggle between the individual and the group. He argued that human societies are defined by their ability to create and maintain institutions and systems of power that allow them to control and manipulate individuals.

An early pertinent exploration of crowd behavior, grounded in Gustave Le Bon's seminal work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), offers valuable insights into the intersection of sports, particularly football, and nationalism. Although Le Bon did not explicitly discuss football, his theories on crowd psychology provide a robust framework for comprehending the dynamics of collective emotions and behaviors exhibited by passionate sports fans.

Le Bon's elucidation of the psychological transformations within crowds, marked by heightened emotions and suggestibility, proves relevant when applied to the fervent environment of football matches. In these settings, individuals undergo a perceptible shift, adopting a collective mindset that aligns with the nationalistic fervor commonly associated with such sporting events.

While Le Bon did not address football explicitly, his theories offer a nuanced lens for analyzing the symbolic expressions of identity within sports contexts. Researchers can leverage Le Bon's insights to delve into the collective experiences of fans, the formation of group identity, and the broader implications for nationalism within the realm of football.

In summary, Gustave Le Bon's theories on crowd psychology, though not originally formulated for football, provide a robust theoretical foundation for comprehending the emotional and collective dimensions of sports events. Applying his insights enables a more profound understanding of how football intersects with and influences nationalistic sentiments.

The FIFA World Cup Culture Wars

Edward Said, a literary critic and cultural theorist who is best known for his work on Orientalism, argued that Western representations of the East were not accurate reflections of reality, but were constructed in order to maintain Western power and dominance. In his book *Orientalism*, Said wrote, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said, 1978, p. 2). The discourse of Orientalism is a discourse of Western power and cultural hegemony; it is not so much about the existing social and historical realities of the Islamic Orient but is rather conditioned by the will to control and culturally dominate the latter by continuously representing it as the opposite Other to Western democracy. In the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, attacks on Islam and Qatar must be understood as integral part of Western Orientalism.

Western coverage of the event ranged from focusing on logistical and infrastructural issues, such as the construction of stadiums and transportation systems to discussing the cultural and religious implications of hosting the event in an Islamic country. The following are some of the most controversial and confrontational areas that were covered:

1. Human Rights issues, gender discrimination and complex social landscape: For example, an article in *National Geographic* titled "5 things to know about Qatar, the 2022 World Cup hosts" (Blakemore, 2022) offers a multifaceted view of the country, particularly in anticipation of the FIFA World Cup. While it highlights certain positive aspects such as the nation's wealth, modern infrastructure, and diverse population, it concurrently raises significant concerns and sheds light on controversies.

One major point of contention revolves around human rights issues, notably the alleged inhumane conditions for migrant workers involved in constructing World Cup stadiums. The report underscores international worries and criticism surrounding these conditions, with claims of thousands of worker deaths. Additionally, it addresses the potentially harsh repercussions for LGBTQ individuals, given the country's strict laws against homosexuality.

Gender disparity emerges as another area of concern, with Qatar having the world's largest male-to-female ratio. The imbalance is attributed in part to the reliance on male migrant workers, contributing to an environment where discrimination and violence against women persist. The report notes that women in Qatar face restrictions, requiring male permission for activities such as marriage or travel, which has drawn criticism from rights groups.

Diversity is acknowledged as a positive aspect, with a mosaic of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds represented in Qatar. However, the report juxtaposes this diversity with criticism of the treatment of migrant workers, who make up a substantial portion of the population. Reports of discrimination, abuse, and wage theft concerning these workers are highlighted, revealing a complex social landscape.

2. Linking Qatar with terrorism: For example, an article in *Mississippi Sports Law Review* titled "World Cup 2022: From FIFA to Terrorism" (Adams, 2016) uses a language that associates Qatar with terrorism. The article alleges that Qatar has been a consistent supporter of terrorism globally, specifically mentioning its purported relationships with HAMAS and other designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). The claims suggest that Qatar has provided significant financial support, material aid, and funding for construction projects, including those in Gaza. The article argues that the United States has a legitimate interest in taking legal action against Qatar due to its alleged involvement in supporting terrorism. The author contends that hosting the FIFA World Cup in Qatar is not only a bad policy decision but also illegal,

given the accusations of Qatar's involvement in terrorism. It calls for FIFA to reconsider Qatar as the host country and suggests that there is ample time for a legal hearing before the scheduled World Cup in 2022. Throughout the world competition, there was increased attention on the part of media in the West to Islam as a negative force in shaping the authoritarian cultural practices and traditions of Qatar, as well as the ways in which the whole event would show these rather unacceptable aspects of the religion.

With respect to the Moroccan team, two moments in the team's successful course were surrounded with controversial, or rather biased, coverage of its success. Through their moving displays of gratitude and love, the 'Atlas Lions' not only showcased their talent as footballers but also (1) reminded the world of the important role that mothers play in shaping their own lives, as well as (2) expressed their faith through collective *Sujoud* (prostrating to thank Allah) on the playground after each success. However, those public displays of affection between the players and their mothers and recurrent *Sujoud*—key factors in the team's widespread popularity throughout Africa and the Middle East that earned them a legion of devoted fans—only stirred ridicule and condemnation in Western media. A leading Dutch media, NRC, contended that the tendency to "glorify mothers" should be halted, asserting that the concept of "mother-worship" obscured a more "pessimistic portrayal" of women's status in Morocco. Highlighting the low employment rates among women in the country, the columnist concluded that "the Moroccan woman is far too much a mother, and nothing else" (Hertzberger, 2022). Another German journalist compared the Moroccan players to Daesh, simply because of the way they expressed their devotion through *Sujoud* or raising the index in a thankful way. Germany's television channel Welt has issued an apology after facing criticism for its controversial and offensive remarks against Morocco's national football team (Rahhou, 2022).

Key themes and trends in media coverage that dominated the football scene did little but perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islam that have always been at the heart of the Orientalist discourse. Those trendy images and motifs included the tendency to conflate Islam with terrorism, the comparison of Moroccan players to Daesh, and the portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed and in need of rescue. On the other side, fans and supporters of the Arabo-Islamic world coalesced behind the feats of the Moroccan football team, celebrating its victories and expressing their admiration and joy for the national players. Football has long been a powerful tool for creating and reinforcing national identities. It is a sport that is deeply rooted in many cultures, and can be seen as a form of national pride, with fans of a particular team or nation often displaying their loyalty and passion for their team or nation through their support of the team or nation's players and coaches. A growing body of literature has explored the role of football in the construction and expression of cultural identities, ranging from making use of football as a tool for nation-building to deploying it as a tool for political mobilization in the formation of ethnic and racial identities. Joseph Maguire (1994) for instance, discusses the role of football in the construction and maintenance of cultural identities, showing that football provides a platform for the expression of national identities; it is used to reinforce national, regional, and local identities, deploying symbols, rituals, and discourse which reflect and reinforce national identities, even in seemingly trivial ways. In the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the Arab media and youtubers celebrated the Moroccan team victories in a strikingly collectivist and homogenizing discourse that combined pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism by speaking about the team as the 'Arab' team and displaying the joy and excitement of supporters from the whole Muslim world.

In "The Afro-Amazigh World Cup Debate Revisited," (2023) by Brahim El Guabli, the writer discusses a similar polarization in the coverage of the Moroccan team's participation between its Arab and Afro-Amazigh followers:

The heated, and oftentimes unsavory, debates in social media over this issue essentially took place between two large camps. There was, on the one hand, the Afro-Amazigh camp, whose members believed that Morocco was playing for Imazighen (Indigenous Amazigh people) and Africans only, and, on the other hand, the trans-Arabist camp, which believed that Morocco was representing the entire Arabic-speaking world.

The homogenizing discourse of Islamist and pan-Arabist ideologies that the Arab media mobilized overlooked "the cultural and linguistic richness that exists within this larger and interconnected space that extends from the Atlantic Ocean to Kurdistan," El Guabli points out.

In "Meme-Forcing the Moroccan Re-Reconquista," (2023) by Cristina Moreno-Almeida, the writer argues that memes and labels used by Moroccan followers on social media recall the Moorish empire and the conquest of Al-Andalus; the writer discusses several memes that depicted Spain as Al-andalus as part of the rise of the "Moorish Movement, an amalgamation of ultra-nationalist social media meme pages, profiles, and groups employing the language of the 'alt-right'." Heated online debates concerning the history of al-Andalus and the Moroccan role in its conquest, as the writer says, are best epitomized by Walid Regragui, who was re-labelled Walid Ibn Ziyad recalling the memory of Tariq Ibn Ziyad as the conqueror of al-Andalus.

In turn, the Spanish national Far-Right party Vox has reappropriated the notion of Reconquista (reconquest) in their own communications, to underscore "the time when Spaniards took their country back" and drove the Muslims out.

These are some of the aspects of the culture wars that surrounded the coverage of the last FIFA World Cup. The Moroccan fans made it clear through their response to Jamal Debbouz that any ambivalence is unacceptable in such identity politics: Wearing a split T-shirt—half Moroccan and half-French—Debbouz epitomizes the ambivalent situation of his cross-cultural belonging. But to the fans, driven rather by crowd behavior, vehemently rejected Debbouz's ambivalent attitude reading it as a sign of betrayal.

Football, Migration and Diasporic Experience

Fascinatingly, in their article titled "The Atlas Lions' 2022 World Cup Run and Morocco' Global 'Both/And'," published by Nizar Messari and Jonathan Wyrzten shed light on the nuanced understanding of the Moroccan team, and cultures at large, employing the "both/and" logic:

Defying any attempt at either/or categorization, what the Moroccan team captures and embodies is the distinct "both/and" reality of Moroccan global identity, history, and experience. These Moroccan paradoxes and tensions have been on full display in Qatar (2022).

In the rest of this section, I want to expand on this "both/and" logic and how it could be deployed to recast a new cultural politics that is inspired by the experience of diaspora. The latter can be challenging and complex, as it often involves loss of connection to one's cultural and linguistic roots, as well as experiences of discrimination and marginalization in new communities. At the same time, diaspora communities can also be resilient and adaptive, creating new cultural forms and identities that reflect both their original heritage and their experiences in new places. "Diaspora is not just about displacement; it is also about the conditions and modes of belonging that emerge in displacement." - James Clifford, "Diasporas".

Certainly, recent national efforts, epitomized by Mohammed VI Academy of Football, should be a source of pride to all Moroccans, and have been very fruitful. However, among the 32 national teams competing in the 2022 World Cup, the Moroccan squad distinguishes itself by boasting the largest contingent of players born outside the country. With a remarkable composition of 14 out of 26 players hailing from

various nations such as Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Canada, the team proudly represents the Moroccan diaspora on the global stage. Only twelve of the World Cup's twenty-six players were born on the Moroccan soil. Two of those Morocco-born players left the North African kingdom at an early age to join the Moroccan diaspora in Europe. Morocco's World Cup team contains a diversity of languages, including Arabic, Dutch, French, and Spanish. Arabic, English, and French are reportedly used to communicate among teammates. Despite the potential complexities that could arise from the diverse backgrounds of the players, the Moroccan team has turned this very diversity into a formidable asset. Led by their coach, Walid Regragui, a French-Moroccan with deep roots in both countries, the team has fostered a remarkable sense of camaraderie and unity among players from various backgrounds. Their decision to represent the country of their heritage rather than their birthplace sparks numerous discussions regarding topics such as integration, diaspora involvement, and national identity. Suffice to mention here the interesting examples of two footballers: Achraf Hakimi and Ziyech.

As the son of Moroccan immigrants (his father was a street vendor and his mother a house-cleaner, Achraf Hakimi has a diasporic experience that has shaped his identity and his outlook on life. Growing up in Spain, Hakimi faced discrimination and prejudice as a result of his Moroccan heritage. He has spoken about how he was often the only non-Spanish player on his youth teams, and how this sometimes made him feel like an outsider.

Despite these challenges, Hakimi found a sense of belonging and purpose on the football pitch. He credits the sport with helping him to overcome the obstacles he faced as a young migrant, and he has spoken about how he feels a sense of responsibility to represent both his Moroccan and Spanish identities in his career as a professional footballer.

Throughout his career, Hakimi has also used his platform to advocate for migrant rights and to speak out against discrimination. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2019, he said, "I'm proud of my origins, but I don't like people who want to make a distinction between races or cultures. We are all human beings and we all have the same rights."

Overall, Hakimi's diasporic experience has helped to shape him into a talented and driven athlete, as well as a passionate advocate for social justice and equality.

The other example is Ziyech. He was born in Netherlands to Moroccan parents. He began his career with a Dutch club before moving to Ajax Amsterdam and then Chelsea in the English Premier League. Ziyech played for the Moroccan national team in the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups. Despite being born and raised in the Netherlands, Ziyech chose to represent Morocco at the international level due to his Moroccan heritage.

Ziyech has spoken publicly in the past about the pride he feels in representing Morocco at the international level, despite being born and raised in the Netherlands. In an interview with Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* in 2019, he stated that "playing for Morocco is something special for me. My parents were born there, and I feel connected to the country and the people. It's an honor to wear the Moroccan jersey."

In 2017, Ziyech strongly criticised the racism and prejudice he faced in Dutch stadiums; in an interview with a local Dutch magazine, he said:

"If you make any small mistake here knowing that you are of Moroccan origin, you are the victim of exaggerated criticism unlike the ethnic Dutch who have a greater margin of error and benefit from much indulgence." He added:

"The funniest thing is that when you succeed in your life by being an exemplary citizen you are no longer a Moroccan but a Dutch man in their eyes."

But Ziyech's experience as a diasporic footballer may have also shaped his playing style and approach to the game. He is known for his technical ability, creativity, and flair on the pitch, and has cited his multicultural upbringing as an influence on his style of play. In a 2018 interview with Dutch magazine *Voetbal International*, he stated that "I come from a multicultural environment, and that has taught me to be creative and to find solutions in difficult situations. That's what I try to do on the football field as well." Being a Moroccan football player in Europe means, for these two players and others like them, breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes; it also means connecting with Moroccan heritage in search of inner strength and resilience.

Conclusion

Narratives that connect football matches to historical legacies of cultural confrontation need also to be framed within recent postcolonial critical discourses that bind together postcolony with its metropolitan opponent. In Edward Said's words, the overlapping histories and intertwining narratives of power and resistance must override over nationalist and parochial calls to cultural politics. In Edward Said's words: "Overlapping and intertwined histories force us to recognize the mutual implication and interdependence of different cultures and societies, and to acknowledge the ways in which the histories of different peoples and nations have been shaped by broader historical and social forces." (p. 117) The last words in this paper should go to Younes Belhanda:

"Football is a universal language that transcends borders and cultures. As a diasporic Moroccan player, I want to use this language to build bridges and bring people together."

Conflict of Interest

The author of this paper declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Biography

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